



From crisis to community: peace programs for schools, refugees, and internally displaced people in Iraqi Kurdistan

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Abstract:

Despite little research on its effectiveness, peace education is a common response to societal violence in post-conflict societies. Hence, there is a need for research evaluating significant projects. This paper explores the outcomes of a Community Peace Education Program conducted in 2014-2016 by the Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution Studies (CPCRS) at the University of Duhok. It presents the aims and methodology of the program, then assesses its efficacy in enhancing participants' ability to transform attitudes and behaviors, as well as the skills acquired and applied within and outside the workshops. It examines both the short- and long-term effects on participants' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behavior through pre- and post- evaluations.

The methodology was based on a feedback process that included quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. The results indicate that participants acquired new insights regarding peace, conflict, and violence. They reported enhanced nonviolent conflict-resolution skills, strengthened connections, and diminished negative attitudes and behaviors towards others .

The popularity and perceived effectiveness of this peace education program pilot was among the reasons for institutionalizing peace education programs in all schools in the region .

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CPCRS.

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من الأزمة إلى المجتمع: برامج السلام للمدارس واللاجئين والنازحين في كردستان العراق ١ د. مأمون عبد الصمد محمد

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الملخص:

على الرغم من قلة الأبحاث حول فعاليتها، فإن تعليم السلام هو استجابة شائعة للعنف المجتمعي في المجتمعات ما بعد النزاع. لذا، هناك حاجة إلى أبحاث لتقييم المشاريع الهامة. تستكشف هذه الورقة البحثية نتائج برنامج تعليم السلام المجتمعي الذي تم تنفيذه في الفترة من ٢٠١٤ إلى ٢٠١٦ من قبل مركز دراسات السلام وحل النزاعات (CPCRS) في جامعة دهوك. يقدم الأهداف والمنهجية الخاصة بالبرنامج، ثم يقيم فعاليته في تعزيز قدرة المشاركين على تحويل المواقف والسلوكيات، بالإضافة إلى المهارات المكتسبة والمطبقة داخل وخارج ورش العمل. يفحص كل من التأثيرات القصيرة والطويلة الأجل على معرفة المشاركين ومهاراتهم ومواقفهم وسلوكهم من خلال التقييمات قبل وبعد الورش التدريبية.

كانت المنهجية قائمة على عملية تغذية راجعة شملت استبيانات كمية ومقابلات نوعية. تشير النتائج إلى أن المشاركين اكتسبوا رؤية جديدة بشأن السلام والنزاع والعنف. أفادوا بتحسين مهارات حل النزاعات بالطرق السلمية، وتعزيز الروابط، وانخفاض المواقف والسلوكيات السلبية تجاه الآخرين.

كانت شعبية وفعالية هذا البرنامج التجريبي لتعليم السلام من بين الأسباب التي أدت إلى إضفاء الطابع المؤسسي على برامج تعليم السلام في جميع المدارس في المنطقة. الآراء المعبر عنها في هذا المقال هي آراء الكاتب ولا تعكس بالضرورة وجهات نظر CPCRS.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

تعليم السلام، التقييم، السلوك، المواقف، الملكية المحلية.

Introduction:

In recent decades, millions of Iraqis have been forcibly evicted and throughout the nation's history they have endured violence, destructive conflicts, persecution, and infringements of their civil and economic rights. After such a prolonged era of distrust, hostilities and restrictions on freedom, violent attitudes and behaviors have become accepted as normal habitual practices. In 2014, the capture of Central Iraq by ISIS prompted an exodus of individuals to Kurdistan, escaping severe bloodshed through ethnic and religious persecution. Currently, refugees and displaced individuals live in camps and among host communities, creating specific local contexts and conflicts in both situations – and consequently requiring context-specific solutions.

In response to this unsustainable situation, the University of Duhok's Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution Studies (CPCRS) has, since 2002, facilitated faculty training, organized peace conferences and engaged in research related to peacebuilding and peace education. In particular, the Community Peace Education Program (CPEP)⁽¹⁾ was implemented from 2014 to 2016 for schools and internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps, tailored to address the unique local needs. The activities included interactive workshops, access to educational resources, supplementary materials, and information regarding human rights in the local Kurdish language.⁽²⁾

A well-balanced society is one in which individuals perceive themselves as integral contributors, thereby fortifying the community. In such a society, they have the means to resolve conflicts that are likely to arise between host communities and IDPs over social services

(1) Funders included the USAID Ambassador's Fund, War Child, Spirit of America, UNICEF, and UNDP.

(2) <http://web.uod.ac/ac/institutes-and-centers/center-for-peace-and-conflict-resolution-studies/about/>

(like water and electricity), diversity acceptance, cultural sensitivity, self-awareness, inclusiveness, engagement, and cooperation. Furthermore, they are able to apply their knowledge of their situation to become engaged, productive social members.

Peace education responds to the complexity of the multifaceted situation by seeking to develop participants' attitudes, behavior, and knowledge through a greater understanding of their context, alternatives to discourses of violence, and practice utilizing new knowledge and skills. Thus, participants on peace education projects become active members contributing to a more peaceful society, acknowledge the value of diversity, and gain self-awareness, enthusiasm, inclusiveness, engagement, and cooperation.

I. From Crisis to Community: the need for peace programs for Iraqi IDPs

The significance of peace education in Iraq arises from the decades of persecution and a brutal environment, and the consequent displacements and flow of internally displaced individuals, to the extent that, in 2016, Iraq had four million IDPs (Edward, 2016). This study addresses the influx of individuals displaced within and into Kurdistan due to ISIS crimes in Ninewa, Iraq, as well as those escaping from Syria. Both communities possess a protracted history of animosities and antagonism against each other. A variety of ethnic and religious groups migrated to Kurdistan and, in certain instances, cohabited in the same encampment, with resultant problems. The CPEP engaged these populations in camps, urban centers, and educational institutions. At that time, tensions often emerged among communities accusing each other of ISIS affiliation or support, and these were compounded by the strain on housing resources and services due to the rising numbers of internally displaced persons and refugees. Duhok accommodated fifty percent of all IDPs in Iraq while the CPEP was in

progress. In parallel, the Kurdistan Region faced an economic crisis and ongoing conflict with ISIS.

IDP communities in Iraq have been through difficult times and experienced different forms of violent conflict. Levels of mistrust, tensions, accusations, and prejudice have been high. Moreover, confusion abounded regarding ISIS affiliation as, in some cases, people actively joined ISIS voluntarily, while others became trapped in ISIS-controlled areas, forced to stay and comply with their edicts. Accusations of ISIS affiliation toward individuals, towns or villages, tribes, and families abounded without means of disproving such claims. Many displaced young adults dropped out of school due to cultural and linguistic issues.⁽¹⁾ Consequently, in their new host area, they did not have the chance to complete their education, let alone study peace and human rights concepts. However, they had a lot of free time and very few opportunities to occupy this time, compounding their dissatisfaction and emphasizing the need for peace programs.

Outline of the Community Peace Education Project

This CPEP was specifically designed for refugees and internally displaced people in camps in the Duhok area. It was grounded in an awareness of the specificities of local needs and aimed to engender open discussion. The project was set up by CPCRS in collaboration with New York University (NYU) and designed to incorporate feedback as an integral part of the project to help ensure sensitivity to the local context. Initially a pilot project in schools that began in 2014 and involved 108 workshops, the CPEP also involved a further 72 projects in a variety of venues, each was active for one year and was followed up for another two years with very positive feedback.

(1) For example, IDPs from different parts of Iraq may have previously received instruction in Arabic. However, public schools in the Kurdistan Region use the local Kurdish dialect as the primary language of instruction.

It included highly participatory workshops and access to educational resources, supporting material, and information about human rights in the local Kurdish language, as well as Arabic. The project implemented workshops in various areas, reaching almost all IDP and refugee camps in Duhok. Participants included Yezidis, Muslims, Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen; many had fled from ISIS within Iraq, as well as from Syria.

The primary objective was to give participants the knowledge and skills needed to become peace education ambassadors who could actively address daily violence in the community and thus become contributing members of a peaceful society. Thus, these ambassadors would develop the skills necessary to resolve conflicts.

Local trainers from CPCRS designed and adjusted workshop contents in response to participant input, generating a highly interactive process to ensure the contents of workshops were closely linked to the societal context. To enable this, the overall curriculum framework was flexible. The trainers, all of whom were local, had been trained in a NYU faculty in Iraq, held Master's degrees in Peace Studies, and had practical experience in delivering workshops with local and international NGOs. They held regular meetings among themselves and with NYU colleagues to discuss challenges.

The demand for these workshops was huge. They were conducted in tents, in hot weather, and often without electricity. Despite this, and the fact that trainers gave participants no materials (or compensation) except knowledge and skills relevant to peace education, the workshops were extremely popular. Trainers often had to turn interested youths away due to the limited capacity of twenty participants per workshop. To respond to demand, trainers ran more workshops than planned.

For example, teachers who attended workshops with students wanted to have workshops specifically for teachers, and demand grew among university students for elective courses. Because of the positive impact of the initial workshops, the CPCRS conducted CPEPs in 108 foundation schools in Duhok City in the 2016 academic year in 40 local NGOs' premises and all 32 IDP camps. The project also conducted workshops with religious groups, civil societies, NGOs, youth centers, and employees working in camps, and preceded by pilot schemes in schools.

A two-month follow-up period allowed participants to reflect on their learning and apply new skills within their communities. In the follow-up meeting, participants shared their experiences, challenges, and successes in implementing peacebuilding strategies. This ongoing engagement deepened their understanding of the program's impact and fostered a sense of ownership over the peacebuilding process.

II. Theoretical grounding

Two main approaches underlie the CPEP's grounding: peace education and contact theory.

Peace education

Defining peace is as tricky as achieving it because peace means different things to different people. On the other hand, Lederach (1997) argues that every conflict has three levels, although the top level, then the middle level, are the most influential bodies in peacebuilding. However, essentially, peace is context-based; a process and transformation of conditions and situations. Thus, peace education also needs to be contextual. As Fountain (1999, p. 1) explains, it is a process of promoting the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values needed to bring about behavioral changes that help to prevent violence, both overt and structural. This involves resolving conflicts peacefully and creating

conditions conducive to peace, whether at an intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, national, or international level. These will inevitably be dependent on context. When IDPs and refugees fled to Kurdistan, they entered a new context and, in doing so, created a new context for host communities. Consequently, both communities are experiencing contextual changes and the PCEP needs to be tailored to this.

Peace education has been described as, "an education that is transformative, redirects, and reenergizes those who pause to reflect on what their lives have been and take on new purposes and perspectives. The transformation begins when a person withdraws from the world of established goals to unlearn, reorient, and choose a fresh path" (McWhinney & Markos, 2003, p. 16). The aim of peace education can be understood to transform not only the minds of individuals but also the structures of a given institution or even society (Snauwaert, 2009). As Bush & Saltarelli (2000) argue, peacebuilding education provides the most valuable strategies for post-conflict societies as it demilitarizes the mind, problematizes the status quo, provides alternative approaches, and delegitimizes violence as a means of addressing problems by shifting the focus to tolerance and trust. Thus, the CPEP seeks to provide a space to facilitate this.

Contact theory

Contact theory, as articulated by Allport (1958) and subsequently expanded by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006), posits that intergroup interaction can significantly diminish negative preconceptions and prejudices when certain circumstances are met. Like Northern Iraq, most societies comprise numerous ethnic and cultural groups with differing values, traditions, and interests. While multiculturalism is often praised for its advantages, Schulenkorf and Edwards (2012) warn that it may also incite conflict. Historical instances of such conflicts encompass those in Israel and Palestine, Cyprus, Yemen, Kenya,

Rwanda, South Africa, and Sri Lanka, also less diverse cultures like Northern Ireland, in addition to the Catalan and Basque regions of Spain.

Research, including that of Bar-Tal (2004) and Salomon and Cairns (2010), has evidenced the efficacy of peace education programs based on contact theory in fostering mutual understanding, reconciliation, and coexistence within profoundly divided cultures. As a result, various agencies, including the education system, have attempted to counter negative and divergent attitudes by deepening familiarity and encouraging empathy between conflicted sides.

As indicated in the literature, successful peace education depends on several critical factors identified by Nadler (2002, p. 137-138): deliberate equality, interpersonal trust, appreciation for diverse cultural beliefs and practices, and a focus on natural, pressing, everyday problems. Nadler (2002) emphasizes the latter, arguing that addressing concrete, shared challenges is essential for contextually relevant training.

The protracted history of oppression in Iraq, coupled with a government-enforced strategy of divide and rule, has fostered profound mistrust among its varied groups. This has led to a widespread hesitancy to interact with others, frequently favoring communal interests over wider society issues. As a result, many Iraqis have concluded that peace can only be achieved through isolationist approaches. The emergence of ISIS exacerbated these tensions, shattering longstanding relationships and reinforcing the notion of an irreparable 'we versus them' attitude.

Specific considerations for local-international collaboration

Contextualization is essential to the success of any peace program, as confirmed in interview by Krmanj Othman, an advisor to

the Kurdistan Independent Commission for Human Rights and founder of the Peace and Human Security Organization:

“Peace education is connected to ongoing social changes within society and cannot be separated from the status quo; one cannot distinguish education from society or society from education. Unfortunately, what we study at school is not linked to our society. For the culture of violence to be replaced by one of peace, we must bring our society's negative practices into the light and make them open for discussion.”⁽¹⁾

The CPEP in Duhok was designed by an accredited academic government institution (the public university), so the program aims were trusted by academics, participants and the government alike. New York University supported the University of Dohuk in consultation and observation, which also gave it international credibility. For each year, the trainers gathered and discussed the challenges encountered, which enabled them to update the curriculum in response to the context.

All of the trainers were active in civil societies from the area and had worked for different NGOs, bringing knowledge areas and the context. Hence, everything was done taking into consideration the conflict sensitivities. The need to be responsive to local knowledge requires collaboration between INGOs and local NGOs, without which projects will inevitably feel like a part of an imposed program and consequently undermine participants' commitment. As Kaream Hassan, the coordinator of Al Messalla, an Iraqi NGO supporting development of non-violent capacities, remarked, “more emphasis must be placed on

(1) Interview with Othman Krmanj, advisor to the Kurdistan Independent Commission for Human Rights and founder of the Peace and Human Security Organization, July 2016.

local NGOs, as they possess superior knowledge of community needs.”⁽¹⁾

According to Ahmed Ali, a curriculum developer at the Ministry of Education, multiple factors influence the integration of human rights education into existing education.⁽²⁾ In particular, he highlighted the importance of reliable support from INGOs, to complement the sensitivity to local context. He also noted the compelling results of pilot peace education programs implemented in schools.

Similarly, Ali Dhahir, program director at International Relief and Development, asserted in interview that:

“The agenda of INGOs must meet the beneficiaries' priorities and requirements. Because both are frequently changing in places of unstable security, agendas should be flexible enough to respond to these changes.”⁽³⁾

Often, peace projects come from abroad, ready-packed to be implemented in a society, while the grassroots people are not involved in the planning, design, or implementation. Other times, INGO donors present a list of potential projects, and local NGOs have to make proposals based on this. Moreover, the target group may also be chosen by the donor. However, local NGOs need to be able to involve a broader range of stakeholders at all stages since human rights are interpreted differently in different societies. As Kaream Hassan argued, “there cannot be one size fits all in the INGOs agenda”;⁽⁴⁾ while Ali Dahir explained that “without the involvement of stakeholders, the

(1) Interview with Kaream Hassan, coordinator of Massal, a local NGO, July 2015.

(2) Interview with Ahmed Ali, 2018.

(3) Interview with Ali Dhahi, program director of International Relief and Development IRD, August 2015.

(4) Interview with Kaream Hassan, July 2015.

message cannot be disseminated widely nor accepted by the community.”⁽¹⁾

Another problem is that there are many different local and international NGOs working in the field of human rights without communication and coordination. As Ali Dahir argued,

“The NGOs need to organize their work; they need to know about one another's work to avoid duplication, confusion, and wasting people's time. There are many times when different NGOs do the same job simultaneously.”⁽²⁾

Thus, the international agenda needs to be focused more on what people of post-conflict societies want rather than what donors want. Othman Kirmanj explained their attitude as: “If you don't do what I want, I won't help you.”⁽³⁾

Local NGOs have to play a broader role to involve as much as active stakeholders in any selected communities because, as Ali Dahir argued, “human rights are interpreted differently in different societies, and without understanding and support of stakeholders, the messages cannot be disseminated widely and/or accepted within the community.”⁽⁴⁾

Dhahir also explained how this can be encouraged:

“Target groups must be chosen based on specific criteria; often, NGOs choose people for training to complete the numbers. Each community has certain people who play vital roles, and these must be targeted for workshops and training. For example, religious leaders and university teachers carry influence with the people; therefore, one must recognize their role when planning to teach

(1) Interview with Ali Dahir, August 2015

(2) Interview with Ali Dahir, August 2015

(3) Interview with Othman Kirmanj, August 2015

(4) Interview with Ali Dahir, August 2015

human rights. Their speech is more legitimized than that of ordinary people.”⁽¹⁾

Having awareness of the above issues, throughout the CPEP, the trainers worked freely without external pressure regarding the content of the workshops. The content was refined through partnership and mutual feedback. The dynamic between local and international actors in peacebuilding is complex. While INGOs often bring valuable resources and adhere to global human rights standards, their outsider status can sometimes hinder their effectiveness. Conversely, local actors possess in-depth knowledge of the context but may be constrained by power structures. To optimize peacebuilding outcomes, a delicate balance must be achieved. Effective collaboration between these two spheres is crucial to prevent the replication of structural violence, either local or international, and to foster sustainable peace.

Methodology

Scholars emphasize that, for peace education, the way of teaching is as important as the contents (e.g., Lannert 2003; Brooks & Brooks 2001) and in this program, facilitation was the main critical success of the program. Dewey's definition of education expresses the value of learning through experience and reflection on experience as “reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience.” (Dewey, 2005, p. 47)

Before running the workshops, the CPEP trainers had many training sessions on conflict transformation, mediation, and facilitation by specialists and global experts to augment their background in academic peace studies. The trainers created the curriculum, practiced the training, and received feedback and comments from CPCRS and

(1) Interview with Ali Dahir, August 2015

NYU colleagues. This was key in developing mutual respect among the team and opened up the curriculum and facilitation to external feedback on a scheduled basis.

The training itself employed different methods of delivering content, including brainstorming with participants to discover their baseline knowledge and encourage buy-in. Fun games and role plays, dramas, stories, energizers, and different exercises were useful in supporting participants' interactive learning to absorb information. After each game or activity, trainers facilitated reflection in which participants shared their thoughts and feelings arising from the experience as well as lessons learned. Experience-based learning is often used in peace education, where participants' own experience and knowledge are important in the learning process (Oppenheimer, Bartal & Raviv, 1999).

Delivering the workshops

In total, CPCRS conducted 108 workshops in schools and 72 workshops in community youth spaces and refugee/IDP camps for a total number of 3,502 participants (1961 male and 1541 female). It employed 18 trainers (5 female and 13 male).

Initially, public schools were selected with the support of United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) representatives in Iraq and in coordination with the Directorate of Education in Duhok. UNICEF provided guidance and recommendations during the selection process of the schools. Two trainers (one from CPRS and one from NYU) monitored most of the workshops and wrote yearly evaluation reports.

a. Target groups

The workshops included participants from diverse geographical and demographic backgrounds: from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRG), disputed territories, and Ninewa Governorate, representing a

wide variety of ethnicities, religions, and workshops sought a gender balance. They included Kurdish, Arab, Turkmen, Yazidi, Assyrian, and Christian participants from both host and displaced communities. To accommodate linguistic diversity, workshops were conducted in Arabic, Kurdish, or a combination of both languages based on participant preference.

The workshops, which mainly targeted youths, were conducted in schools, refugee camps, social centers and camps, and university campuses, as follows:

Schools in the following places: Duhok City, Sumel, Zawita, Batele, Sharya, Khanke, Faida, Seiji, Tenahi and Domiz.

Syrian refugee camps in the following: Domiz, Gawilan.

Social centers and camps: Sumel Youth Center, Batele, Khanke, Sheikhan, Qadiya, Aqre, Essian, Germawa, Sharya, Chameskho, Bardarash, Bersiv 1, Bersev 2, Domiz 1, Dawodia, Zakho, Mangesh, Deir Aboun Zakho, Brayat Youth Center; Shekhan, Alqosh, Mahad.

Universities: University of Duhok Student Center, Mosul University (in exile); Nawroz University.

b. Unpacking conflict: A journey towards peace and understanding

The workshop consisted of three days:

Day One: The workshop began with an introduction to the project and CPCRS, followed by exploring peace, violence, and conflict resolution strategies. Participants actively engaged in games and discussions to understand diverse perspectives within conflicts.

Day Two: The second day focused on identity, diversity, and their impact on society. Participants examined global examples to discern both the positive and negative consequences of diversity. The destructive effects of ISIS on the previously harmonious society of

Mosul were highlighted, emphasizing the importance of effective diversity management. The concept of "Do No Harm" and an analysis of societal dividers and connectors were introduced. Participants were encouraged to play the roles of peace ambassadors, mediators, peacemakers and bridge-builders.

Day Three: Two months after the first workshop, participants returned to share how they incorporated conflict resolution skills into practice. They shared successful cases of mediation of conflict, including in IDP camps and schools. This highlighted the setting up of peace clubs in schools and their role in conflict resolution. CPCRS supported many of these clubs in local public schools.

c. Participatory Learning: A Cornerstone of Effective Peacebuilding

Participants employed pragmatic interactive techniques, games, energizers, and real-world illustrations in the workshops to guarantee engagement:

- **Experiential Learning Methods:** Involves active engagement and participation of individuals in sharing their experiences, perspectives, and knowledge for a guided collaborative learning experience.
- **Games and Energizers:** The interactive element helps to build an excellent rapport between participants while explaining complex concepts in a fun and engaging way.
- **Practical Case:** Sharing real-world experiences to transform theory learned into practical peacebuilding.
- **Laughter:** Humor is important in establishing rapport, easing tension and fostering a positive learning environment.

Methodology of the evaluation

The evaluation process was undertaken by local (CPCRS) and international (NYU) collaborators using jointly developed pre- and post-surveys. To ensure cultural relevance, questions were crafted in both Kurdish and Arabic. Before each workshop, trainers meticulously reviewed the questionnaires to verify language clarity and sensitivity, seeking additional input from community members when necessary.

Fountain (1999, p. 32) states that peace education evaluation might include surveys, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, observations and reviews of school records. Such methods are appropriate for evaluating learners' attitudinal and behavioral changes comprehensively. In line with this, this paper draws upon mixed methods.

These included interviews with participants as well as four interviews with members of international and local NGOs involved in peacebuilding activities in the area, quantitative data collected from surveys and monitoring, and evaluation data provided by staff. These were processed through an analytical lens constructed through observation and the notes from the trainers, as well as previous experiences of the researcher.

Thus, student reflections, observations, and trainer notes helped identify whether these attitudinal and behavioral changes occurred. During the training, the approaches that were used were active and participatory pedagogy and experiential. Participants brought their own experiences to the workshops and were given time to practice that knowledge. This helped to see the changes made through their involvement in implementing the knowledge and skills gained in the workshop, as they were given two months to practice and digest the knowledge and skills gained. The participants reflected on their knowledge and what this means to their context. The participants were

allowed and encouraged to share their knowledge, ideas, and feelings. Participants connected and compared their new experiences to the earlier experiences, how they connected to their previous knowledge and beliefs. Then, they learned how to use what they have learned in their context and how to use the knowledge and skills to benefit themselves and their community.

This active and participatory approach is a means of teaching and learning that is appropriate to the democratic ideals of peace education (Dewey, 2005; Reardon & Cabezudo, 2002). This type of methodology is most suitable to assisting observational assessment of attitudinal, behavioral, and value changes, though it should be noted here that not all value and behavioral changes are desired, nor do educators expect to change students quickly (Harris & Morrison, 2003). Then, all the gathered data in different methods were compared and contrasted to check the validity of the information.

Results and discussion

The outcomes of the pre- and post-tests, as well as qualitative data from interviews and observations, confirmed the effectiveness of the workshops. The survey answers reflected that 94% had a clearer understanding of peacebuilding and 96% had a concrete grasp of what the objectives of the workshop were. Participants exhibited competencies associated with supporting peace, such as conflict resolution, communication, dialogue and problem-solving. Most importantly, 95% reported increased self-confidence and expressed a desire to become future peacebuilders, thus positively impacting their communities (Evaluation Report, 2016). Multiple concepts were presented in the workshops, which were related, compared, and contrasted against participants' real-life knowledge and behaviors. These topics included peace, violence, the principle of 'Do No Harm,' conflict, diversity and multiculturalism.

According to Bar-Tal (2002, p. 33), experiential learning is of great importance in fostering values, attitudes, perceptions, skills and behaviors that are necessary for peace education. Participants were given the chance to self-reflect and critically assess the structure of society to challenge disruptive issues in their context. This process inspired participants to adapt their own attitudes to align with core peacebuilding principles. In addition, participants were given the opportunity to use knowledge and skills in a practical context, testing and validating the effectiveness of peacebuilding concepts through direct experience of their impact.

Knowledge acquisition and application

Practical exercises and real-world applications helped participants develop a greater understanding of non-violent conflict resolution. Through self-reflection, they realized how certain personal actions could affect others. The increased self-awareness allowed people to assume peacebuilding roles within their communities. This manifested in their attempts to mediate conflicts between family members and peers. They paid much closer attention to the dynamic of the conflict, prioritized calculated action and avoided harmful interventions. Participants explored different viewpoints, examining assumptions and the diversity of human experiences to drive meaningful change in community.

Acquired skills and their impact

Participants implemented the following skills gained in the project over two months in different contexts.

a. Communication skills

Participants in the workshop developed a broader understanding of how active listening and communication can impact others. As one

participant stated, “This was the first time I really understood how important giving other people a voice is.”

People also posted about how the workshop challenged their preconceived assumptions and helped to develop empathy through active listening. They learned how to broaden their horizons, shift away from generalizing and stereotyping, become more open, and use more accepting language. Facilitators encouraged the use of the phrase, “some say” and “others believe” when encountering opposing ideas so as to help promote understanding and respect for differing opinions.

b. Conflict resolution

Participants were able to practice their conflict resolution skills in real situations. They reported that they mediated disagreements between friends, family and peers, demonstrating their capacity to overcome obstacles and reach consensus. Many participants embraced the role of mediator, actively seeking solutions that benefited all parties involved. Participants discovered the importance of taking a break before responding, making listening a first priority, and working together cooperatively. In doing so, they learned to look beyond fixed positions and toward core interests to find common ground and arrive at win-win solutions through collaborative problem-solving.

c. Reflective thinking

By using reflective thinking, participants showed creativity in problem-solving and developed alternative ways of conflict management. A participant captured this new ability by explaining: “I’ve learned to step back, think of different possibilities, and make better decisions”.

d. Experience of empathy and different perspectives

As part of the course, the group continued to develop their best skills at empathizing with others; one of the principles of the workshop

was about how “putting themselves in other people's shoes” can lead to understanding of different perspectives.

During the workshops, participants were introduced to different strategies involving empathy to support conflict resolution; in particular, they learnt how these strategies can lead to peace. At the end of each workshop, participants expressed their views regarding the lessons they took away. One participant shared that: "It provided me with the knowledge and skills to handle conflicts in a constructive manner."

e. Building hope

Participants felt positive about sharing their new knowledge and skills with others. They displayed a commitment to advancing peace and reconciliation in their communities.

f. Positive action and self-reflexivity

Participants' commitment to positive action was also expressed through their own enactment of positive responses to conflict. They felt confident about their ability to make informed choices which had positive outcomes. In addition, the participants effectively countered stereotypes and discrimination by promoting respect and tolerance for diversity.

III. From awareness to action: Fostering positive change

Workshop participants showed profound transformations in both attitude and behavior. They worked on managing their reactions by becoming more self-aware in the moment and having to think about the words that will come out of their mouths. The lessons learned in the workshops were eagerly applied in their homes, encouraging them to actively strive for peace with their families and neighbors. They learned that conflict, properly addressed, can lead to productive

resolutions rather than destructive outcomes, and this knowledge infused them with the courage to act in the service of peace.

The participants were committed to peacebuilding and were excited to share the skills and knowledge they gained. They learned how to de-escalate tensions in personal relationships and how to positively impact the situation. They also began to embrace diversity more openly. One participant said, "I realized I'm capable of things I never thought possible." Another said, "I take my time considering my decisions now."

After workshops were completed, participants voluntarily established peace clubs in camps and schools, with continued support and mentoring from the center. These clubs have undertaken a variety of initiatives such as fundraising for families in need, community clean-up campaigns, peer mediation, and conflict resolution training. They built school-based conflict resolution centers and also developed online platforms to extend their reach.

Developing agency: Shifting perceptions of conflict

Many participants arrived with minimal understanding of conflict and peace studies, viewing conflict solely through the lens of violence and chaos. Conflict, in examples they gave, means "violence, abnormality, fighting, killings, situation characterized by mess, injustices, chaos, frictions." Initial conversations confirmed an overwhelmingly shared premise that diversity breeds strife, citing evidence in the Middle East that conflicts are caused and/or exacerbated by diversity. But a comparative study of Sudan and the United States undermined this assumption, showing that homogeneity is not tantamount to peace and problems did not arise from diversity in itself, but from how diversity is managed. This encounter represented an important change in participants' perspective of conflict as a complex and multi-dimensional process.

Participants became more aware of different perspectives, interpretations and how others might see their own perceptions differently and, thus, became more open and inclusive. A participant remarked, "I have learned to give others time and space to speak; before it was based on tribal lines and I could only see how others collide with my ethnic background." Another person reflected, "I have learned to allow others to express their opinions." In a country historically divided by ethnicity, the participants held discussions unlike any others, breaking stereotypes and building understanding. One participant said, "A lot of what I thought I knew about other people thoughts proved to be incorrect."

What surprised participants, however, was their ability to participate in open, honest discussion, even about sensitive subjects. As one participant put it, "We shared our deepest thoughts and feelings," "We talked about a lot of things that were taboo, very controversial things." The workshop promoted a favorable environment for constructive discourse, during which new ideas were shared and professional networks established.

Consistent with Staub (2002, p. 80-1) who claims that students learn best by doing, participants took the initiative to establish Facebook groups and organize activities within their schools and communities, translating their knowledge into tangible actions. Through this, workshop participants effectively leveraged social media to disseminate peace messages and serve as mediators within their schools and families. As one participant remarked, "We have become the conflict resolution committee for our school." Participants used messaging apps to connect and collaborate on peacebuilding initiatives. Their efforts extended beyond their immediate circles, with some graduates assuming formal mediation roles within their schools.

Notably, school administrators expressed enthusiasm for the program and requested additional training for teachers. These results

confirm Vogt's view that, "education not only gives learners new information, it can change how they think, alter their personalities, and provide them with new social experiences." (Vogt, 1997, p. 246)

Fostering critical reflection: A path to transformation

'Powerful,' 'meaningful,' and 'transformative' – these are words that participants used to describe the workshop they attended, reflecting deeply on lessons learned in conjunction with their lived experiences. Following Mezirow (1991), this process enabled critical reflection on underlying assumptions and beliefs. How one participant described a shift of mindset, "As I was born in family of disliking or avoiding the foods from other religions, now, I have adopted a more open mindset and also encouraging my family." While this indicates a door open towards a better future, we should remember that progress is gradual and, in some instances, people attitudes and behavior may revert to previous.

Inquiring learning methods allowed them to become active and reflective learners. Through critical questioning, the workshop inspired participants to explore their community's challenges, nurturing a culture of curiosity. Such an approach created a sense of ownership and engagement and motivated the participants to look for solutions in their respective contexts.

Inquiry-based learning helped participants grow important life skills. These essential skills were critical thinking, effective communication, and problem-solving. Sharing personal experiences and perspectives enabled a better understanding of the development of cultural diversity and nonviolence. Ultimately shaped a community of learners who felt confident and respected, and who felt able to express and articulate diverse viewpoints.

The initial process of participatory learning and action challenged participants' own assumptions about themselves, their communities, and the world. They developed new insights regarding events and social structures of the past through critical reflection and dialogue. Such a process of self-discovery is grounded within the theoretical paradigms of Montessori (1949), Freire (1970), Boulding (1988) and Reardon (2001), all emphasizing the potential of introducing the concept of peace and social justice into pedagogy.

Overcoming barriers: Intergroup contact and reducing prejudice

Initially, participants were reluctant to interact with members of other ethnic groups. But many overcame these early anxieties and saw the advantages set before them. One participant shared: "For a minute, I hesitated to interact with people with different backgrounds, but I saw the beauty of giving it a try." Another said: "One of the biggest challenges we face in our society is dealing with ingrained prejudice between groups."

Contact theory suggests that direct exposure can diminish prejudice, yet Aronson et al. (2005) notes that these attitudes often persist. The intention of this program was to provide opportunities for mutual understanding and small shifts in mindset by facilitating ongoing engagement and dialogue. For many of the participants, the workshop provided a unique experience of intergroup dialogue and learning. At first, the new method and material were not without resistance ridden efforts, particularly in camp conditions where controversial communities with existing tensions lived together.

In order to tackle these challenges, workshop facilitators highlighted the goals and expectations of the workshop right from the beginning. While schools and youth centers offered more familiar settings, conducting workshops in camps necessitated added sensitivity due to the intricate dynamics among various ethnic groups. The

presence of language barriers, with both Arabs and Kurds preferring their native languages, presented an ongoing challenge.

Discussion

Many interrelated factors contributed to the success of the CPEP: the preparation, the design, its implementation responsive to feedback, and the continuity of the project for two years. In particular, the relevance of the project to the local context (through design, ownership and authorship by local trainers), and the collaboration between the University of Duhok – an institution trusted by local institutions and individual as well as the government – and international support, using creative, participatory, engaging methods of teaching, and the continuing development of trainers.

First, the project was carefully designed to respond to sudden change in the local context – in particular, the influx of IDPs to Dohuk, primarily Yesidiz escaping from Nineveh Plain (and other disputed territories with a history of marginalization by both Iraqi and Kurdish government). This had exacerbated existing prejudices regarding stereotypes and the societal divisions among IDPs, host communities and refugees (especially so, since most people of Dohuk are Muslim and ISIS was also Muslim). Peace education provided a tailored transformative (strategic) response to deal with the manifested tensions by offering dialogue, critical reflection, empathy, and nonviolent conflict resolution skills.

Second, the existence of already established institutional capacity played an important role. The CPCRS already had trained staff and organizational experience to enable the project to be more efficient and effective. Moreover, it is considered to be a trusted institution by the KRG, INGOs and local people. This helped access and acceptance by people, improving cooperation.

Third, the creative and innovative pedagogical approach was an essential factor. The workshops were entirely new to the youth in schools, youth centers and refugee camps. The participants were accustomed to the traditional, banking method,⁽¹⁾ teacher-centered, lecture-based learning environment, while the CPEP introduced experiential learning that gave importance to the participants' knowledge. This increased participant engagement and encouraged students to be more reflective about their own perspectives and experiences. Moreover, although the knowledge and skills offered were new, they were highly relevant to participants' lives, dialogue, communication, empathy and nonviolence, which captured their motivation and interests.

Fourth, the collaboration between University of Duhok and the NYU proved to be highly productive. The existence of external expertise provided fresh perspectives and challenged assumptions that local trainers had previously taken for granted. The external involvement helped deconstruct deep-seated beliefs and narratives, while instigating meaningful self-appraisal among trainers. The collaboration created mutual learning and co-creation rather than bringing pre-packed knowledge and imposing it on the local environment. This strengthened the contents of the project and the methods of delivery.

Fifth, the project involved continuous improvement and self-assessment. Regular meetings, follow-up sessions, and informal discussions enabled trainers to deal with challenges, refine teaching methods, and adapt training based on participants' feedback and

(1) The banking method of education is a term introduced by Brazilian writer, Paulo Freire, to describe the teaching method that sees students as passively receiving knowledge from the teacher without developing critical thinking. See <https://wrt120.digitalwcu.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/freire.pdf>

context. This made the project a dynamic process, making it responsive to the context and so enhancing long-term effectivity.

Finally, the project emphasis on participants practicing knowledge follow up was very constructive in the wider community. They were encouraged to apply what they learnt in their daily life practices and return to the training to discuss their experiences. The intentional diversity and balance of diversity – including males, females, refugees, IDPs, and host community members – encouraged participants to learn from one another and discuss their issues through dialogue was another key strength. For most participants, this was their first time working collaboratively in a mixed group, which challenged their existing traditional learning.

The workshops presented a novel way of teaching that included critical thinking, active learning, and intercultural dialogue. Shifting attention from the mere pursuit of knowledge toward skill development, the program equipped participants to become change makers themselves. Kurdish-language materials and an emphasis on experiential learning were critical in making content accessible and relevant to participants' lives. Peace education could revolutionize societies but has a long way to go in a conservative context like Kurdistan. Here, it is a step in the right direction that the program is promoting critical thinking and is not afraid to question established practices. Nonetheless, there is still a long way to go to overcome resistance in a society that has long lived on the edge of conflict and fear, so as to ensure that the vision of a more peaceful and inclusive Kurdistan becomes a reality.

Hailing from conflict-ridden areas where formerly harmonious communities had become polarized, participants reported increased trust, understanding, and positive perceptions of other ethnic groups following the workshop. This newfound empathy fostered a stronger foundation for conflict resolution.

However, certain challenges need to be resolved.

Program limitations and challenges

a. Evaluation challenges

Scholars have acknowledged the specific challenges involved in evaluating peace education programs (UNESCO, 2011) because this requires evaluation of the internalization of values, attitudes, skills, and behavior patterns, which in turn necessitates long-term studies. However, most evaluation studies often suffer from significant shortcomings, such as a very short timeframe of analysis (Nevo & Brem, 2002, p. 274). There is often insufficient funding for detailed qualitative evaluation over the long term. The monitoring and evaluation of the CPEP went through various phases. Initially, it was monitored by a NYU-employed Monitoring and Evaluation specialist, then monitoring and evaluation was jointly conducted by NYU staff and CPCRS staff. Finally, an Institutional Learning approach was adopted, with greater funding allocated to transform monitoring and evaluation data into externally available shared learning for the local and international peacebuilding communities.

b. Resource constraints and high demand

Key challenges the program faced were due to limited resources and high demand. Due to limited resources, not all participants interested in joining had been able to, resulting in disappointment and frustration from potential beneficiaries. Moreover, this lack of resources also prevented the development of specific training programs for groups such as teachers and students.

c. Sustainability and growth of program

A specific budget line for long-term follow-up could support efforts to assess program impact and offer continuous support to participants. Despite the program's initial successes, this was not a

sustainable solution due to the ever-changing needs of the population and the inability to build a program upon the successes.

d. Operational and implementational obstacles

Staff turnover at NYU disrupted program continuity and knowledge transfer, impacting the overall effectiveness of the program. The target population has often a gender imbalance and the trainers come from the same background which could lead to a male dominated training and lack of female trainers. Insufficient funding for monitoring and evaluation has also limited the program's ability to evaluate the outcomes and refine it based on the data. All of these linked attributes have considerably affected how far and well this program has been effective and how sustainable it is moving forward.

e. Social resistance and taboos

The conservative nature of Kurdish society presents significant challenges to individual autonomy and critical thinking. Some crucial subjects are taboo while intense social pressures to adhere to traditional norms and values impede the acceptance of new, peace-promoting ideas and behaviors. This focus on uniformity diminishes the value of diversity, stifling creativity and innovation.

Moreover, historically, the ruling majority governed the nation and marginalized other groups, restricting their rights. Meanwhile, state agencies have exacerbated these issues through the implementation of divide-and-conquer strategies.

Overall, the project illustrates how international and local collaboration can be used to ensure a peace program is responsive to the population's needs. Moreover, collaboration between international and local partners provides an open education, where students are able and free to debate currently unquestionable or taboo questions, which is fundamental if they are to understand peace. International support for this project was essential for the supervision, finance, and training of

local groups as a peace education program was unlikely to be supported by the government.

Conclusion

The legacy of violence and division in post-conflict societies is an important issue that can significantly affect peace. This study explored the effectiveness of a peace education project in promoting positive change and cultivating a peaceful culture. The program empowered individuals to become agents of change within their communities by providing participants with critical thinking, empathy, and conflict resolution skills.

The key findings show that peace education can effectively challenge violent norms and inspire participants to put their learning into action. Participants demonstrated increased self-awareness, decreased prejudice, and a strengthened ability for critical reflection. However, it is important to recognize that while the program had promising short-term results, achieving lasting peace requires a consistent and thorough approach. Addressing systemic inequalities, promoting social justice, and fostering inclusive governance are vital for lasting peace.

Trainers' capacities in peace education, conflict resolution, and mediation were significantly enhanced through the collaboration between CPCRS and NYU. This joint effort firmly established CPCRS as a dedicated peacebuilding institution engaged in research and training. The project deepened the trainers' understanding of the local context, whilst raising international awareness of CPCRS' work. Through this, the partnership built a strong infrastructure and empowered its personnel, establishing a good foundation for long-term peacebuilding work.

However, to reach their full potential, further investment in peacebuilding programs is necessary, and ongoing support and evaluation is also needed. Thus, through peace education and empowerment of people, a better future can be achieved.

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